Sounds of Silence

Why didn't Reagan address AIDS in a public speech until 1987?

May 8, 2015 By Trent Straube

A newly uncovered White House memo. Click on the image to expand.

Nancy Reagan Turned Down Rock Hudson's Plea for Help Nine Weeks Before He Died. You probably remember this recent BuzzFeed news item. Newly released documents revealed that a dying Hudson had asked the Reagan White House to help him see a doctor in France. He was refused.

"These documents are the tip of the iceberg," Charles Francis, president of the Mattachine Society of Washington, DC, tells POZ. "There are hundreds and hundreds of boxes of material from Reagan staff that are still sealed, unprocessed and locked away." If the group's name sounds familiar, that's because it has been around a while. Co-founded in 1961 by gay rights pioneer Frank Kameny, it was relaunched in 2011 by Francis and repurposed as "archives activism"—with the goal of researching and restoring deleted LGBT political history.

One area they're interested in is Reagan's nearly seven-year delay in addressing AIDS. He became president in 1981, the same year that AIDS was first widely reported, but he didn't mention the disease in a public speech until 1987.

"A key historical question," Francis says, "is 'How did that happen?' Many have conjectured that it was Reagan himself [who refused], but another line of inquiry, which interests me, is the role of staff."

In the '80s, explains Francis, the power and scope of congressional and presidential staff exploded, and they acted as gatekeepers. For Reagan, this included people like Gary Bauer and Carl Anderson. The theory is that highly ideological staff could have surrounded the president and kept out any dissent on AIDS for several years.

To see if this is the case, the Mattachine Society has been filing Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to access files in the Reagan Library. That's how they uncovered Hudson's plea for his life, Francis says, noting it was "buried in a box of materials about hospital assistance—it had nothing to do with AIDS." They also found a Bauer memo to Reagan recommending that no

homosexuals serve on the AIDS commission.

Despite roadblocks to accessing presidential libraries—Francis was told a FOIA request is expected to be processed in four years!—the Mattachine Society continues its detective work. For example, by following leads from its Reagan research, the archive sleuths are asking the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for all memos and notes surrounding a May 1987 meeting with CDC director James Mason, Reagan and Bauer.

Hmmm. We can’t wait to learn what they dig up.



A vintage Mattachine button.

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